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Education's Challenge

Convocation address

EDUCATION'S CHALLENGE

By Chief Justice Carl V. Weygandt
Ohio State University Commencement
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President Bevis, Members of the Board of Trustees, Members of the Faculty, Graduates and your friends:

Commencement addresses seem to be susceptible to classification into two general categories.

One apparently requires a formal discussion of a subject taken straight from the icy stratosphere of theoretical abstraction. It may or may not prove of interest or value to the members of the graduating class. In fact one of my associates on the Supreme Court of Ohio recently volunteered the discouraging advice that every commencement address should have at least three characteristics. First, it should by all means be too long. Second, it should be pedantic. And, third, as conclusive evidence of profoundest scholarship, it should by all means contain at least one paragraph which neither the speaker nor any member of the audience can hope to understand.

The second type of address is less formal and is predicated on the hypothesis that a commencement belongs primarily to the graduates who, as they suffer through the address, would like to hear something that may be of assistance in the imminent and inescapable task of bridging the gap between the theory of the class room and the reality of the workaday world. In response to my inquiry, President Bevis has been willing to help me by the assurance that you and he would greatly prefer the latter type of address. I concur in that judgment.

Any commencement is important. Especially is it of importance to the graduates and also to their families. For most graduates it constitutes the culmination of their life's sole experience in an institution of higher learning. And, unless this class is different from the many others it has been my high privilege to address, there are some here today who are the first in their entire family lineage to enjoy the opportunity to graduate from a college or a university. If such there be, I remind you that this occasion means almost as much to the members of your families as it does to you. One of the things every graduate should highly resolve on this occasion is that never -

matter what the years may bring forth - will he or she permit him or herself to become unmindful of the sacrifices of the mothers and fathers who made possible an education which in many instances they themselves were denied.

Then, too, present day commencements are of especial importance by reason of the presence of a high percentage of veterans from military service. Recently when delivering a commencement address at the University of Cincinnati I discovered that of the 59 graduates from the Law School 56 were veterans - approximately 95 per cent. The single fact of the presence of many veterans here today is an eloquent commentary on your good judgment. If you were like many other veterans you re-entered civilian life with grave, conflicting doubts whether you should yield to the temptation to find immediate employment or follow the far more challenging course of taking of your valuable time to return to your Alma Mater, pick up the loose ends and complete your interrupted formal education. Probably you never were confronted with a more important or more difficult decision. But I am certain that the wisdom of your judgment will be demonstrated repeatedly with the increasing perspective of the years.

And there is another word I am sure you married veterans want me to add. That is to express to your wives your sincerest appreciation for their encouragement, their loyalty and their willingness to share in unspectacular but indispensable fashion in your struggle for an education. To you and your wives I think I shall disclose a bit of highly confidential information. During a conversation with President Bevis some weeks ago he confessed to me that when he became president of this institution he did not suppose he would live to witness the day when baby carriages would be considered semi-standard equipment on the campus at Ohio State University.

Each of you graduates has met the challenge of obtaining an education, and we, your friends, are here today to rejoice with you on the occasion of your attainment of that important objective.

But next I want to talk to you somewhat informally about the still greater challenge of making proper use of your education, now that it has at last been obtained.

Apparently my generation has convinced yours of the presumptive value of an education. Otherwise such occasions as this would not be taking place throughout the length and breadth of this land of ours. But now the testing time is at hand. No longer are you content to have the matter rest on presumption alone. Rightly you are demanding clear and convincing evidence of the truth of the things we have been telling you about the worth of an education. Quite properly you are insistent on seeing for yourselves whether by reason of your education you have been or will be able to make a more intelligent choice of an occupation, business or profession. You want to discover whether an education is of any value in enabling you to make a more intelligent choice of a helpmeet or to become a better husband or wife and parent and thus assist in halting the shocking disintegration of civilization's basic social institution - the family. It will not take long for you to reach the conclusion that the cause and cure for the upsurge of juvenile delinquency are found mainly in the home, and that while the courts, the schools and the churches can be of great assistance, they cannot hope to serve as a complete substitute for the proper kind of home.

Then, too, you graduates of the College of Law are wondering just how much your education will assist you in passing the Bar Examination which is scheduled to begin on the last Tuesday in this month. You may be surprised to learn that we still receive examination papers containing sentences utterly innocent of either a subject or a predicate. I want to assure you that the Supreme Court of Ohio will have no objection whatsoever to at least one subject and at least one predicate in each sentence in your answers, just as your clients will have no objection thereto when you are seeking the accuracy of expression necessary in drafting their wills, contracts and other documents. Seriously, I want to give you the further assurance that any law student who possesses normal intelligence and who has paid attention to business during his law course should have no fear of our Bar Examination.

You have in mind many, many questions. In fact you students of the present day embarrass me with your inquiries. The embarrassment

lies not at all in the fact that you ask the questions but rather in the fact that my generation has left so many of them unanswered.

You are asking why in this scientific age we have mechanized almost every sort of process for the purpose of reducing the hours of labor required of each individual without having greatly concerned ourselves about a proper use of the additional leisure. In the mechanization of our various processes why have we produced every sort of device without seriously inquiring whether they probably will prove to be the eventual slaves or masters of their creators? Have we attempted to produce a golden age of literature simply by speeding up our printing presses and then awakening to the realization that the result is but a brazen one, such as books of the "Forever Amber" type? You students were not born yesterday, and you have learned that unfortunately there is such a thing as human lechery in the world, but you tell me in no uncertain terms that you do resent the affront to both your decency and your intelligence by the sordid attempt of some miseducated individuals of my generation to exaggerate and then, still worse, glamorize the basest misconduct to which the flesh is heir. I concur in your resentment. I appreciate that I am speaking plainly, but I am certain that you want no dissembling on an occasion as serious as this. You want the truth, and you are entitled to it.

Consistent with this difficult assignment, I next want to assure you that the admissions I have been making to you are not the end of the story. While it is true that my generation has not fully met the challenge of a proper use of its education, as you and I wish it had, this does not mean that you have nothing to learn from either my generation or the countless ones that antedated mine. Newton D. Baker, former secretary of war and once a trustee of this university, used to say that no generation can be more deeply in trouble than when it feels it has nothing to learn from the experience and wisdom of the ages. He did not imply that no generation has anything to learn from itself. He simply was emphasizing the thought that under our

program of universal education there is little reason for any generation to repeat the mistakes of its antecedents. Says President Gannon of Fordham University: "All true civilization is ninety per cent heirlooms and memories - an accumulation of small but precious deposits left by the countless generations that have gone before us. Only very proud or very ignorant people imagine that our muddle-headed present can begin everything all over again every day - and invent a new alphabet, a new multiplication table, a new code of laws and a new religion."

An important charter sometimes neglected in our courses in history and political science is the Ordinance of 1787, passed by the Continental Congress July 13 of that year to provide an organic law for the government of the territory lying north of the Ohio river, south of the Great Lakes and east of the Mississippi river. At that time there was not a single known permanent white settler in that part of the territory now known as Ohio, and yet in the first sentence of Article III of the ordinance education in this part of the world was given its original impetus by our wise forefathers who provided that:

> "Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

This provision did not merely suggest that it might be advisable to encourage schools and the means of education for a few years, a decade or a century. Rather it provided in unmistakable, mandatory terms that "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

It may be commented that this Ordinance is no longer in effect, being superseded in this state by the Constitutions of 1802 and 1851. This is true, but so profound was the influence of the great charter that most of its provisions - including this one - were carried into each Constitution.

That education and knowledge and a proper use thereof are necessary to good government has been demonstrated repeatedly in the history of every nation. A friend of mine has told me of an interesting experience of his in World War I. He was a member of

the army that occupied Germany. When they entered the country they were surprised to find that most Germans were friendly. This was difficult to understand, since this was an invading army. However, these troops discovered that wherever they went the German people, generally speaking, were friendly. The reason for this attitude eventually became apparent. Although Germany was among the leaders in the field of education and scientific advancement, the people did not seem to be greatly concerned as to whether they were being governed by an invading army, a kaiser or officials of their own choosing. If they ever had possessed either the desire or the capacity to govern themselves, they seemed to have lost both. Later when the army of occupation evacuated from that territory the troops came away with the conviction that the German people, in spite of their education and scientific advancement, were just as susceptible to demagoguery and misleadership as they ever had been, and that it probably would not be many years until they again would be in trouble that would precipitate another devastating world war. How prophetic was that prediction! And what a dreadful price to pay for indifference!

But let us not confine ourselves to a criticism of distant peoples. A bit of self-examination should be most salutary.

Can there be any doubt in the mind of any well-informed citizen that we are passing through the most critical period that ever has confronted this nation? You history readers recall that the philosopher and historian, John Fiske, wrote a book that still should be required collaterial reading for every student. It is named "The Critical Period of American History" and deals with the chaotic years between the victory at Yorktown in the year 1781 and the advent of the Constitution in 1789. If the author were alive today it would be most interesting and probably frightening to learn what adjective he would employ to characterize our perilous age.

Wholly irrespective of whether we would have it so, we are participants in a deadly struggle between basic philosophies of government - despotism and constitutionalism; and there can be no compromise because they have nothing in common. The former recognizes

no limitation on the power of government; nor does it acknowledge any inalienable right of a citizen - such as freedom of religion, speech, press or assemblage. In fact there are no citizens. The state is dominant and the people are its vassals.

In contrast, constitutionalism recognizes, as stated in the organic law of our own commonwealth, that "all political power is inherent in the people." Ours is a "government of law and not of men." The government itself is subject to law.

And yet in spite of the clearly defined issue, many of us, either through indifference or failure to think clearly, are not assuming our share of the responsibility in meeting the challenge. At the risk of being misunderstood I used to say to my classes in history and political science that a democracy is the most dangerous form of government devised by the mind of man. By that I meant that while a democracy confers the greatest degree of freedom on its citizens, it in turn imposes the greatest responsibility on each individual. Therein lies the danger, because this obligation is one that cannot be delegated and is inescapable. Some of us seem not to have learned that political power never goes begging. I repeat. Political power never goes begging. Invariably unused political power is usurped by those to whom it does not belong. Furthermore, it usually is misused. But of still greater and more tragic importance is the difficulty and often the impossibility of regaining political power after it has been lightly cast aside.

The gravamen of my simple but fundamental message to you is that as a heritage you are living under a form of government that in a century and a half has enabled us to become the most prosperous, powerful and envied nation of the world. If you and I believe in the desire and the capacity of troubled humanity to establish for itself a stable, efficient and just government, is it not both our opportunity and our obligation to make full use of our education in order to "preserve, protect and defend" our democracy against the challenge of those who would destroy it and us?

In conclusion I want to express to you members of the graduating class the sincere hope of your families and many friends that as the challenging years come and go, you may be privileged to enjoy the realization of every one of your most cherished anticipations.